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ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM: COORDINATION AND COOPERATION IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

Ways and means of improving the quality of coordination and cooperation in science and technology for development

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

In response to the request of the former Intergovernmental Committee on Science and Technology for Development, the present report provides information on the current situation with regard to coordination, both globally and within the United Nations system, on matters relating to science and technology. Based largely upon recommendation deriving from the meeting of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Task Force on Science and Technology for Development, held in December 1992, the report further decribes proposals for enhancing interaction between the Commission on Science and Technology for Development and the specialized agencies, and provides some proposals for strengthening future coordination.

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INTRODUCTION

1. The former Intergovernmental Committee on Science and Technology for Development, in its resolution 1 (XI) B of 3 May 1991, 1/ requested the Secretary-General to submit a report to the Committee at its next session on ways and means of improving the quality of global coordination and cooperation in the area of science and technology for development, as well as system-wide coordination within the United Nations system.

2. The Economic and Social Council has a major mandate for system-wide coordination in the economic, social and related fields 2/ and the Commission on Science and Technology for Development is expected to assist the Council in its central policy coordination functions in the field of science and technology for development within the United Nations system.

3. At the Secretariat level, preliminary ideas for improving system-wide coordination in the field of science and technology were considered by the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Task Force on Science and Technology for Development at its thirteenth session held in New York in December 1992. At the request of the United Nations Secretariat, contributions to this report were also received from several specialized agencies and other organizations of the United Nations system.

I. BACKGROUND AND CURRENT STATUS OF COORDINATION

4. A report was submitted to the former Intergovernmental Committee on Science and Technology at its eleventh session on "New developments and trends in the programmes and activities of the United Nations system in science and technology for development" (A/CN.11/1991/5). That report, which is available to the Commission, contained information on, and analysis of, relevant activities of 26 organs, organizations and bodies of the United Nations system in three areas, namely, endogenous capacity-building; technology assessment, monitoring and forecasting; and coordination and cooperation at the country level. The recommendations of the report focused, inter alia, on strengthening of field representation in science and technology within the overall efforts being made by the system in that respect, and on the system-wide focal point role of the former Centre for Science and Technology for Development in technology assessment and early identification, analysis and forecasting of global scientific and technological trends.

5. Based on past experience, the main issues relating to past inter-agency coordination efforts, and requiring present attention, may be summarized as follows:

(a) General fragmentation of efforts within the United Nations system;

(b) Lack of regular contacts, and inadequate exchange of information, between the governing bodies of the specialized agencies, and the need to strengthen coordination among Governments' positions vis à vis various United Nations bodies;

(c) Continued need to secure better coordination of the specialized agencies' programmes at national and regional levels;

(d) Absence of a joint United Nations information system in the field of science and technology;

(e) Need to strengthen pre-project analysis work.

6. Greater efforts should be made in examining the specific approaches to coordination and cooperation that the ACC Task Force on Science and Technology for Development has helped to develop over the past 10 years, which include (a) joint activities, (b) policy guidelines, (c) endogenous capacity-building pilot projects, and (d) harmonization at the country level.

7. Joint activities encompass planning and formulation and execution of joint projects based on shared responsibilities and comparative competence. The main difficulty has been in securing the funds for execution, but problems have also arisen in joint administration.

8. Policy guidelines formulated during the period 1987-1988 were to serve as points of reference for individual organizations in designing projects and rendering assistance to member countries. They were to be indicative, and their application was to be left up to the organizations concerned.

9. The ongoing pilot projects undertaken by the Science, Technology, Energy, Environment and National Resources Division of the Department of Economic and Social Development of the United Nations Secretariat on endogenous capacity-building in a number of developing countries originated from discussions by the ACC Task Force on ways to translate the concept of endogenous capacity-building into operational terms. Participation of interested agencies and organizations of the United Nations system in those projects is expected at the final policy dialogue among national stakeholders in each of the countries concerned, when portfolios of prioritized science and technology initiatives are discussed. The involvement of United Nations organizations would also be important in the subsequent implementation of specific programmes and projects, with special emphasis on building of an institutional framework, policy formulation and adjustments, human resources development and technology management. In each country the United Nations Development Programme has been closely involved at every stage of endogenous capacity-building project implementation and could benefit from project results, particularly in relation to country programming exercises.

10. An integral part of the endogenous capacity-building programme that focuses more on the role of the United Nations system as a whole involves the inter-agency missions organized in each of the endogenous capacity-building participating countries. With the aim of better coordination at the country level, such missions assess the effect as well as the effectiveness of United Nations system activities in the field of science and technology in the countries concerned. Several inter-agency missions are planned for 1993. 3/

II. INTERACTION BETWEEN THE COMMISSION ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT AND THE SPECIALIZED AGENCIES

11. In order for the Commission on Science and Technology for Development to effectively assist the Economic and Social Council in its coordinating role, the ACC Task Force, at its thirteenth session, suggested that the Commission draw from the capital of relevant knowledge and expertise available within the United Nations system as a whole. One way of ensuring this would be through active interaction between the Commission and the specialized agencies.

12. Preliminary ideas for improved interaction about which the ACC Task Force was consulted included the following:

(a) Continuation of the practice of oral reporting by the ACC Task Force Chairman to the Commission at its sessions, followed by an open dialogue;

(b) Active participation of ACC Task Force members in the provision of substantive input for the preparation of reports to the Commission;

(c) Preparation of informal papers on the working modalities of the Commission and submission of proposals regarding possible establishment of committees and working groups of the Commission;

(d) Assistance in the identification of substantive themes;

(e) Organization of preparatory meetings by the regional commissions and/or the specialized agencies prior to each session of the Commission.

13. The ACC Task Force members believed that the programme of activities of the Commission would benefit from more substantive involvement of the regional commissions with regard to the commissions' programmes and responsibility.

III. PROPOSALS FOR FUTURE COORDINATION

A. Greater emphasis on coordination at country and regional levels

14. From a geographical point of view, it is generally understood that inter-agency coordination involves three levels: global, regional and national. Global coordination aims at harmonization of policies, formulation of broad guidelines and criteria for implementation of programmes and activities, and, on occasion, concentration of efforts with respect to identified global priority areas and division of work based on comparative advantages and areas of competence.

15. Coordination and cooperation at the regional level are a primary mandate of the regional commissions. There is an increasing emphasis in this direction, together with the need for improved coordination at the national level. Suggestions made in this connection by the regional commissions include creation of inter-agency task forces among core agencies in each region to help prepare for meetings at the headquarters level of the ACC Task Force proper, for

meetings of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development and for other international science and technology forums.

16. It is the view of the regional commissions that regional differences in local conditions and patterns of economic and technological activity between least developed countries and more advanced developing countries warrant a decentralized, region-by-region approach to any international effort of cooperation in pursuing science and technology for sustainable development. Moreover, the regional commissions, with their geographical proximity to, and vast experience in, working with member States in their respective regions, are better placed to be the prime movers in such a decentralized approach. Involvement of specialized agencies, particularly their regional offices and bureaux, and other regional organizations should be sought in these endeavours, as necessary.

17. Some specialized agencies have expressed the view that country-level coordination is perhaps the most difficult kind of coordination to achieve, because actual activities in science and technology at the national level are essentially the responsibility of each country or institution concerned. It is felt that all too often this difficulty emanates from improper machinery and lack of a firm commitment to use science and technology as a force in development that cuts across sectoral specialization. The United Nations must offer those Governments that desire it a maintenance service in the building of this country-level potential. United Nations cooperation can also be strengthened, particularly in analytical work, at the regional level through its representation on established regional task force mechanisms and at the national level through its establishment of pilot task forces with the representatives of agencies of the United Nations system who are present on the national scene.

18. It was thus suggested by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) that country-level coordination in science and technology for development aimed at endogenous capacity-building could, as appropriate, be carried out by established mechanisms, through, for example, the United Nations resident coordinator or the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) resident representative in cooperation with country- or regional-level representatives of other United Nations organizations and bodies. Mechanisms such as donors' round-table meetings should be optimized for the purpose of system-wide coordination. The ongoing inter-agency missions have also been conceived as a means to enhance a more harmonized delivery of assistance by the United Nations system in science and technology in a particular country.

B. Reconfirmed focus on national capacity-building

19. As reflected in Agenda 21, 4/ adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, the international community has not only renewed but enhanced its awareness of the importance of strengthening endogenous capacities in science and technology as a basis for advancement of developmental efforts and for effective use of technical cooperation. In this respect, the Commission may wish to refer to chapter 34 of Agenda 21, entitled "Transfer of environmentally sound technology, cooperation and capacity-building", and other references found in the

"Compendium of excerpts on science and technology related issues and recommendations", 5/ which is being made available.

20. There is a general agreement among the specialized agencies of the United Nations system that the principal objective of science and technology programmes at the national level should be endogenous capacity-building. System-wide coordination at the country level should be aimed at adopting a coherent approach with a view towards achieving that objective within the context of specific countries with particular sets of development priorities.

C. Harmonization at the headquarters level

21. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) expressed the feeling that working-level mechanisms for coordination such as the ACC Task Force on Science and Technology for Development were insufficient, as each of the specialized agencies were bound by their respective governing bodies, which were separate from those of the United Nations proper. The establishment of a mechanism for contacts and coordination among various governing bodies in the field of science and technology would ensure better harmonization at the headquarters level. This could be achieved, for instance, through meetings or teleconferences of heads of science commissions of governing bodies.

D. Coordination on policy studies

22. It is the view of the United Nations University (UNU) that coordination could in principle be facilitated when carried out within a policy studies framework allowing comparative work to be readily organized, but that that should perhaps not be the sole aim of such coordination. Multiple studies are sometimes necessary to bring out a variety of perspectives and recommendations for the benefit of the international community as a whole.

23. However, it is important to ensure that the international community has easy access to the results of various studies in related areas through, for example, a single office of the United Nations system in each country. Establishment of a truly functional data system is regarded by many agencies of the United Nations system as a priority for system-wide coordination. According to FAO, close coordination among United Nations organizations and adequate resources and working relationships with other information sources outside the United Nations system are required in order to reduce to the minimum redundancy and inconsistency of information obtained from various resources.

E. Consultations at the early planning stage

24. The ACC Task Force has emphasized joint planning and programming from the early stages of conceptualization of new activities to enable the relevant United Nations entities to determine the nature and extent of their respective activities and whether the expertise of more than one United Nations entity would be required for a particular activity.

25. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has proposed that the integration of coordinated and harmonized activities into the implementation mechanisms of individual entities be reflected in the medium-term plans, programme budgets and activities of funding bodies. Such arrangements require consultations and coordination at the conceptual stage and would result in the highlighting of a selected number of priority activities of developing countries that require joint action and joint financing from both regular and extrabudgetary sources.

F. Focal point for technology assessment

26. Technology assessment is another identified priority area requiring inter-agency cooperation. The General Assembly, in its resolution 44/14 E of 26 October 1989, decided to entrust the former Centre for Science and Technology for Development of the Secretariat, through the Advance Technology Alert System and in cooperation with other United Nations bodies, to serve as the focal point for technological assessment within the United Nations system and, where possible, for relations with Governments and non-governmental organizations concerning technological assessment activities in Member States.

27. The United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Technology Assessment, Monitoring and Forecasting, held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris from 25 to 28 January 1993, provided an opportunity to examine the question of the focal point with the participation of major agencies of the United Nations system as well as experts serving in their individual capacities and with intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. It made several recommendations regarding the focal point role, including overall coordination and promotion within the United Nations system of activities contributing to strengthening national capacities of Member States for technology assessment, monitoring and forecasting; general support to technology assessment efforts at the national level; establishment of a clearing-house for new ideas, concepts, methodologies and information related to the changing field of technology assessment; and promotion of networking among technology assessment research and practice-oriented institutions.

G. Coordination on identified specific activities

28. It has been found easier and more feasible to foster coordination and cooperation among the various agencies of the United Nations system in relation to specific activities, rather than to try to achieve coordination in broad terms.

29. With this view in mind, the ACC Task Force chose biotechnology and its applications in developing countries as being among the new and emerging areas of science and technology for development for in-depth inter-agency review. After preparing a compendium of United Nations system activities in this field, the ACC Task Force decided to concentrate on the question of the commercialization of biotechnology, with the subject of intellectual property rights as its first consideration. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) was designated to act as the lead agency and, together with

UNDP and other interested members of the ACC Task Force, to identify possible lines of inter-agency action.

H. Building a United Nations scientific and technological information network

30. There is a strong need for an improved system for regular exchange of science and technology information among organizations and agencies of the United Nations system. Such a system could be initiated at the national level (systems already exist in some countries on an informal basis) to include updated information on past, ongoing and planned projects, rosters of experts and consultants, thematic data, planned monitoring, and evaluation missions of various United Nations system agencies and organizations. The system should be based on a computer network.

IV. UNITY OF PURPOSE

31. The Secretary-General, in his statement to the General Assembly at its forty-seventh session, referred to the objective of the reform exercise as consisting in building a unity of purpose for the economic, social and environmental sectors of the Organization and strengthening linkages between those sectors and the political and humanitarian ones.

32. In 1992, the Administrative Committee on Coordination undertook a comprehensive analysis of its role and functioning as well as a streamlining of its subsidiary machinery. The Administrative Committee on Coordination also established an Inter-agency Committee on Sustainable Development. The Inter-agency Committee consists of a core group of representatives (from UNDP, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), FAO, UNESCO, the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)), whose initial term is two years, with open-ended membership for other members of the Administrative Committee on Coordination interested in specific issues in the agenda of the Inter-agency Committee on Sustainable Development.

33. The terms of reference of the Inter-agency Committee include the formulation of recommendations for consideration and decision by the Administrative Committee on Coordination that would enhance the effectiveness of cooperation and coordination within the United Nations system.

34. There is increasing recognition that the work of the Administrative Committee on Coordination should be more focused and more action-oriented. As part of the ongoing process of the review of that body's role and functioning and in relation to the restructuring of the intergovernmental machinery, some of the Committee's existing subsidiary bodies might be subject to major reform.

Notes

1/ See Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-sixth Session, Supplement No. 37 (A/46/37), chap. II.

2/ See annex to General Assembly resolution 45/264 of 13 May 1991 on the restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic, social and related fields.

3/ Further details on endogenous capacity-building pilot projects and inter-agency missions are contained in the report of the Secretary-General on the assessment of the effect of activities of the United Nations system related to the process of creating and strengthening endogenous capacity-building in science and technology in developing countries (E/CN.16/1993/4).

4/ See Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference (A/CONF.151/26/Rev.1).

5/ Extracted from the documents adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.